

Personal Influence and Power Distance: Acknowledging Local Cultures Influence in Conceptualising Public Relations Practices in Asian Countries

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Abstrak: *Tulisan ini bertujuan untuk menyajikan bukti-bukti baru yang berkenaan dengan praktek Public Relations di negara-negara Asia. Berbagai penelitian yang terangkum dalam tulisan ini akan menjelaskan mengapa mengaplikasikan teori-teori Barat begitu saja dalam kajian Public Relations seringkali kurang memberi hasil yang memuaskan. Ada faktor-faktor budaya lokal yang seringkali terlupakan, ternyata memberikan kontribusi yang besar dalam pemahaman praktek Public Relations dalam budaya tertentu. Penelitian ekstensif dari Krishnamurthy Sriramesh (1999) telah berhasil mengkonseptualisasikan sebuah Model Public Relations khusus untuk negara-negara Asia. Banyak penelitian Public Relations di berbagai negara Asia telah membuktikan konseptualisasi tersebut.*

Kata kunci: *praktek public relations, budaya, personal influence, power distance, konteks internasional*

Nowadays, public relations either as a field of study or as a professional practice, has certainly been growing rapidly around the world. The trends

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of internationalisation and democratization all over the world is one of the factors that plays a significant role in contributing this growth. Studies compiled by Chen and Culbertson (1996) are the evidence of the world-wide practice of public relations. In these studies, Asia has become one of the fully explored region in public relations scholarship. There are critiques and explorations of public relations practices in countries such as India, Thailand, China, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and Malaysia. Many of these studies provide nation specific culture in influencing its public relations practices. This paper will discuss cultural and social factors that helps the emergence and acknowledgement of a specific public relations model practiced in Asian countries.

PUBLIC RELATIONS MODELS IN AN INTERNATIONAL SETTING

Ever since James Grunig introduced his famous four models of public relations practices, there has been an extended research conducted all over the world to see the effectiveness of these models in helping the practitioners to achieve excellence in public relations and communication management within their institutions. There are various findings discovered by those researchers , yet basically these findings suggest that the four models of public relations practices may be compatible within an Anglo Saxon cultures only (Grunig, *et al*, 1995:163).

The four models themselves consist of :

- a. Press Agency/Publicity
This model describes propagandistic public relations that seeks media attention in almost anyway possible
- b. Public information
This model characterises public relations as practiced by journalist-in-residence who disseminates accurate but usually only favourable information about their organisations. Both of these models are one way models in that practitioners who follow them give information about the organisation to publics but do not seek information from publics through research or informal methods.
- c. Two-way Asymmetrical public relations
This model can be manipulative, since it uses research to identify the messages most likely to produce the support of publics without having

to change the behaviour of the organisation. Effects are asymmetrical because of the behavioural change needed, benefits the organisation and not the publics, although many practitioners believe that the manipulated publics also benefit from the manipulation

d. Two-way Symmetrical public relations

In contrast has effects that are symmetrical, since practitioners use research and dialogue to bring about symbiotic changes in the ideas, attitudes, and behaviour of both their organisations and publics (Grunig in Botan and Hazelton (eds), 1989:29).

Research shows that public relations departments contribute most to organisational effectiveness when they practice on the professional continuum and emphasize the symmetrical model more than the asymmetrical ones. Yet, Grunig, *et al*, admits that most of the conditions that foster professional public relations in Anglo Saxon countries may not exist in and around most organisations in other cultures (Grunig, *et al*, 1995:163). Carl H. Botan (1992) even argues that applying the public relations models familiar to Anglo Saxon cultures to other cultures without considering factors such as local cultures and local political aspects may lead to ethnocentric public relations practices. He further stresses that even differences in some cultural and national aspects among developed countries themselves have made the study and practice of public relations somewhat different among them. Yet, these differences are minor in comparison to the difference between them as a group and the less developed and previously communist countries where public relations functions may not be assumed to be primarily a business undertaking. And failure to recognise underlying differences in assumptions about public relations, according to Botan, will lead to cause at least two disadvantages. First, it reduces the potential for using public relations to get a better understanding how organisations in other cultures use communication to adapt their relationships with relevant publics. Second, it also reduces the potential for using the knowledge and practical experience of other cultures to inform our practice and understanding of public relations.

Several factors have to be acknowledged, Botan states, if we are understand the differences of public relations practices all over the world. Level of national development for instance, is one of the factors

which cause the differences in public relations practices, especially in those less developed countries. Aspects within the term 'level of national development' such as level of economic development, the legal/political and historical context, and level of market competitiveness are factors that largely contributes to the public relations practiced within specific countries. Several other aspects yet in a more practical matters such as the availability of information infra structure, the amount and kind of media resources, and literacy rates also serves as contributing factors. So, scholars have looked beyond US practices and have questioned whether Western assumptions hold true in cross-cultural public relations research. To support this argument, Wakefield (1996) has offered a framework for research in international public relations. Wakefield's framework suggests that cultural, management, societal and communication theories will help better explain the practice of public relations in an international context. Banks (1995) which examined the assumptions of how organisations communicate in multicultural setting, suggests scholars and practitioners to improve their intercultural public relations communication based on culturally sensitive assumptions for dealing with activists, internal publics, and community members.

Studies conducted by Krishnamurty Sriramesh (1991) in India or Anastacia Lyra (1991) in Greece are good examples of how cultures other than Anglo Saxon cultures practice public relations differently and in accordance with social and political situations specific to their own countries (Sriramesh, 1992; Grunig, *et al*, 1995). A development of public relations models even made possible after these research were conducted. A Personal Influence Model was then introduced after an extensive research of public relations practices in India had been conducted. This model serves as an explanation for the public relations practices influenced by the social and cultural aspects in several Asian countries. In the European setting, the research conducted by Lyra (1991) in Greece contributes to the development of the Cultural Interpreter Model, a model proved to be applied by many Multi National Corporations (MNC) operating overseas.

DOMINANT MODELS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICES IN SEVERAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

From the studies conducted by Sriramesh (1992) in India, Kim and Hon (1998) in Korea, Wu, Taylor, and Chen (2001) in Taiwan, Sriramesh and Takasaki in Japan (cited in Watson and Sallot, 2001), Wu (2002) in China, and Taylor & Kent (1999) in Malaysia, all stress the importance of culture in shaping the public relations function practiced in these countries. These studies even confirm the usefulness of the Personal Influence Model, a public relations model developed by Sriramesh, in contributing a better understanding of public relations practices especially in Asian countries. The Personal Influence Model itself is best described as a “*quid pro quo relationship between the public relations practitioners and strategically placed individuals, such as government regulators, media persons, and tax officials.*” (Sriramesh, *et al*, 1999:285). Public relations practitioners build personal influence with these key individuals by doing favours for them so that they can solicit favours in return when organisations need help. Government regulators frequently bend the rules to help their favourite organisations. Similarly, even without writing a press release, many public relations practitioners are able to place stories in the media by using the influence they have with a friendly journalist or editor. The professionals from India, Japan, and Korea all reported that they ‘entertained’ key publics by providing them with food or drinks and by giving them gifts (Sriramesh,*et al*, 1999).

The Indian data revealed that in every simple organisation the public relations department actively used the Personal Influence Model. In addition to that, the widely used public relations practices in India which derived from the Grunig’s Four Models is the Press Agency/Publicity Model. Most senior executives and public relations practitioners in India believes that providing positive publicity to the organisation and helping build corporate image is the primary objective of public relations. Similar to their Indian counterpart, public relations practitioners in Korea for the most part are using the Press Agency/Publicity Model and the Public Information Model. However they aspire to practice the Two-Way Asymmetrical and the Two-Way Symmetrical Model. The Public Information Model is the most problematic one, since PR practitioners

in Korea are having difficulties in assuming a neutral position between organisation that they represent and the publics, thus making this problem an obstacle to the development of public relations (Kim & Hon, 1998). However, the situation is slightly different in Japan. The study conducted by Sriramesh, *et al* (1999) indeed confirms that the Personal Influence Model is the one that is widely used by Japanese public relations practitioners, which most often conducted by socialising by mass media people every evening. Another study conducted later by Sriramesh and Takasaki (1999) reveals that the greatest emphasis of public relations practices in Japan is on media relations, with Two-Way Asymmetrical Model as a dominant model despite constraints to practice one-way model. However, based on their recent studies, Watson and Sallot (2001) argue that today's Japanese public relations practices align more closely with mixed models of public relations practiced in Western countries.

In Taiwan, similar situation occurs when the current research conducted by Wu, *et al* (2001) support the former findings based on Sriramesh, Kim, and Takasaki's meta analysis research that identified Press Agency/Publicity Model as the frequently practiced model in Asian countries. Wu's studies also reveal that public relations practitioners in Taiwan believe that relationship building is very important. For them, effective public relations is as much about interpersonal communication as it is about media relations. The relationship building is a somewhat inappropriate term in conceptualising the Chinese word "Guanxi", a very important concept to be understood which will explain why Personal Influence Model is very popular in Asian countries. According to Wu (2002), in China, a well established *Guanxi* net can guarantee the success of the person who sits in the core of the web. This kind of relationship pattern is so vital for people living in China that it can maximise your profit and while minimising your risk at the same time. As an interdependent social connecting function, *Guanxi* can exist not only at an individual level, but also can spread out between two companies or among different interest organisations. Furthermore, *Guanxi* is not a short term profit driven interpersonal relationship, instead a good *Guanxi* relationship relies more on the building-up and maintaining process of the brotherhood-like relationship existed among the people involved.

Studies by Taylor and Kent (1999) in Malaysia still present us with similar findings. Personal Influence Model still proved to be the best model to explain public relations practices in New Industrialised Country (NIC) such as Malaysia and other developing countries in Asia. They further stress that in a developing country such as Malaysia, government may emerge as the most important public for public relations practices, a situation which explain why Sriramesh's Personal Influence Model is widely used in these countries.

Those examples of public relations practices in Asian context has presented us with important practical differences in public relations that exist in international setting. Thus scholars and practitioners all over the world must realise that the importation of western theories may not be the best way to conduct public relations activities in international contexts.

HOFSTEDE'S FIVE DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE AND PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICES

After presenting the dominant public relations model practiced in several Asian countries, this article will further explore the cultural context which also contributes to the existence of such specific practices. Here, as this discussion will later shows, practitioners and scholars will finally understand why they cannot ignore the specific cultural practices in shaping the public relations activities practiced in certain countries.

To begin the discussion of the culture's role in the organisational processes, one must firstly realises that beside being a cultural entity in itself, organisations are also culture-bound, either with their larger organisational context or with the socio-cultural environment that surrounds them. Sriramesh and White (1992) believe that societal culture influences organisational or corporate culture because the human resources of an organisation is acculturated into the culture of their societies (p.273). According to Grunig and Hunt (1984), communication as one key foundation of public relations activities has a two-way relationship with culture, as it is influenced by culture and is influencing culture (cited in Sriramesh, *et al*, 1999:274), a statement which support the argument that culture is definitely plays a significant role in public relations practices.

Almost all of the studies or research that has been discussed in the previous sections acknowledge Hofstede's Five Dimensions of Culture as a useful conceptualisation in explaining the cultural characteristic of those Asian countries which later influence their specific public relations practices. Hofstede (1984) identified five dimensions of culture: (1) Power Distance, (2) Individualism / Collectivism, (3) Masculinity/Femininity, (4) Uncertainty Avoidance, and (5) Confucian Dynamism.

His first dimension, Power Distance (PD), is the extent to which a society is vertically stratified, offering different levels of importance and status to members of different strata. It reflects the degree to which a culture believes how institutional and organisational power should be distributed (equally or unequally) and how the decisions of the power holders should be viewed (challenged or accepted). Several examples of countries with high PD are: India, China, Venezuela, Mexico, and Singapore. Whereas countries with low PD are: Australia, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland. The cultures with High PD usually accept inequality as the norm, hierarchical, authoritarian, and oppressive, whereas the low PD cultures are just the opposite.

Secondly, Collectivism refers to the extent to which members of a culture value the individual over the collective. Collectivistic cultures tend to be group-oriented, impose a large psychological distance between in-group and out-group members. In-group members are expected to have unquestioning loyalty to their group, and in a conflict situation members of a collectivistic culture are likely to use avoidance intermediaries or other face-saving techniques. Examples of collectivistic countries are: Korea, Taiwan, China, Thailand, and Columbia. On the other hand, individualistic cultures do not perceive a large psychological distance between in-group and out-group members, value self expression, and are more likely to use confrontational strategies when dealing with interpersonal problems. Examples of individualistic countries are: USA, Australia, UK, Canada, and Denmark.

Thirdly, masculinity/Femininity (MF) refers to the degree to which a culture values such behaviours as assertiveness, achievement, acquisition of wealth, caring for others, social support, and the quality of life. High masculinity cultures believe in achievement and ambition, in ostentatious manliness, with very specific behaviours and products associated with male

behaviour. Examples of countries with high masculinity index are: Japan, Australia, Germany, and UK. Feminine cultures believes less in external achievement and/or manliness, and more in quality of life such as helping others and sympathy for the unfortunate. Low masculinity cultures are: Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland.

The fourth dimension, Uncertainty Avoidance (UA) is the extent to which members of a culture can tolerate and cope with ambiguity. Cultures with high positive scores in the Uncertainty Avoidance index indicate low tolerance for ambiguity and prefer to avoid uncertainty and dissent as a cultural value and desire consensus. In the opposite, cultures with low uncertainty avoidance (UA) index have a high tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, believe in accepting and encouraging dissenting views among cultural members and in taking risks and trying new things. In consequence, cultures with high UA index tend to develop many rules to control social behaviours. Examples of these cultures are: Japan, France, Belgium, Greece, and Portugal. Whereas low UA index cultures need few rules to control social behaviours. Examples of this culture are: India, China, Sweden, Singapore, and Denmark.

Finally, Hofstede's fifth and last dimension, Confucian Dynamism explains the world views of the society that stratifies society and defines role differentiation for members of different strata. China is the best representative of Collectivism and Confucian Dynamism-type societal culture (summarised from Hofstede, 1984; Samovar and Porter, 2001).

Another approach which also important in understanding the public relations practices in Asian countries is coined by Edward T. Hall (1990) with his conceptualisation of High and Low Context Cultures. The characteristic of high context cultures are: much covert and implicit messaging, internalised messages, much non verbal coding, reserved reactions, distinct in-group and out-group categorisation, strong people bonds, high commitment, and open and flexible time. On the other hand, Low Context Cultures are characterised by: much overt and explicit messaging, plainly coded messages, verbalised details, reactions on the surface, flexible in-group and out-group categorisation, fragile people bonds, low commitment, and highly organised time (summarised from Samovar & Porter, 2001; Lustig & Koester, 1999). Asian countries are usually characterised as High Context Cultures.

Sriramesh (1999) points out that Hofstede's first dimension, the Power Distance is very prevalent in India and Korea, for they have a hierarchical social system, and in Japan as well since it belongs to a Collectivistic cultures. He links Hofstede's collectivism to the concept of *wa* (harmony with fellow humans) that Japanese society values. The concept of *wa* also makes the Japanese reticent to voice dissent publicly. Further, Sriramesh believes that this Japanese philosophy affects their public relations practices. Public relations practitioners spend many hours in a place called "the press club" socialising with their fellows media people and "building relationship" seems to be the actual practice of this philosophy. They even invent the term '*nomunication*' from the Japanese word '*nomu*' which means 'drink' to emphasise the importance of the personal influence they have with media people.

In the Indian counterpart, public relations people there coined a term 'hospitality relations' to describe their relationship with their journalist friends. One of the public relations officer in India even admits that most of the stories she sends to newspapers got published due to these 'hospitality relations' she builds and maintains with mass media people (page 285).

Whereas China and Taiwan, as mentioned before, are best described as a collectivistic cultures based on Confucianism. And in these types of cultures, relationship is built step by step, since it is not always easy for outsiders/ member from one group to enter another group, much less to gain acceptance and welcome, especially when one wants to another group which has a higher social status. Thus, one outsiders has successfully gained acceptance, they will carefully maintain and nurture this relationship for future reciprocal and mutual benefits between them. That is why a personal touch is highly valued in building relationships, especially business relationships. A straight, formal business-like oriented relationships are rarely found in these cultures. And this explains as why the Personal Influence Model of public relations is the most practiced model in Asian countries.

As for the Power Distance dimension, since most Asian countries are characterised as high PD index cultures, their hierarchical social system also influences their public relations practices. In section 2 it has been mentioned that other than the Personal Influence Model, the Press Agency/ Publicity Model of public relations is also widely practiced in those Asian

countries. Those studies found that the hierarchical social system of Asian countries makes a situation where stakeholders or activist groups will raise an issue against the dominant coalition is considered minimum or most unlikely to happen, so it is understandable if the Press Agency/Publicity Model has become the second widely applied model in these stratified cultures. Public relations functions are required only to serve the dominant coalition's interests.

In Korea, public relations functions are understood as the preserver of corporate secrets while maintaining positive publicity in the media. In Japan, the subordinate-superior relationship in organisations is heavily influenced by the concept of '*amae*' (the desire to depend on another's goodness) and their 'face saving' philosophy. Thus, since superior-subordinate relationships are perceived as stratified hierarchically, those who works in the lower strata will reservedly accepts inequality as the norm, which in the end contributes to the application of one-way communication flow characteristic of the Public Information Model, another one-way public relations model coined by Grunig (Sriramesh, 1999:288). Research in Malaysia, another high PD country, reveals that government is seen by most organisations as their most important public, which the researchers perceived as one of the implication of this stratified social system in their public relations practices (Taylor & Kent, 1999)

CONCLUSION

As this papers shows you, certain countries have their own public relations practices which is specific due to their own cultural characteristics. Applying Western theories without putting them in context proved to be inappropriate if not misleading. Critiquing that these countries practicing more of an Asymmetrical Models in their public relations functions instead of a Symmetrical ones should not be based on Western perspectives alone. Instead, many aspects such as culture and social political system should be incorporated in the critiques. By acknowledging cultural differences, Sriramesh has successfully conceptualised the Personal Influence Model of public relations as the characteristic of public relations practices in Asian Countries.

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